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Author: Barbara Grabowska, Karolina Kania

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BARBARA GRABOWSKA¹, KAROLINA KANIA²

Coming Back from International Educational Exchanges – Difficulties, Changes, Challenges

ABSTRACT

International collaboration in education has resulted in an increasing number of participants in educational exchanges at various stages of education. Taking part in a foreign intercultural exchange is an important experience, associated with a half a year or a year-long immersion in another culture and with the return home. Changing the residence country for a certain period, learners consciously undertake the tasks aimed at familiarization with the new culture, language, customs or behaviours. Few of them think about the difficulties associated with the comeback. The presented research results show that, during the exchange, learners were able to build their strategy of functioning in the host family and country. As a result, this helped them to handle the difficulties of the reverse culture shock, which is manifested by the optimistic-active strategy applied by most of the learners after returning home.

Keywords:

educational exchanges, reverse culture shock, youth, AFS

INTRODUCTION

The development of international collaboration in education has resulted in an increasing number of participants in educational exchange programmes at various levels of education. Participation in a foreign intercultural exchange is an important experience, which has a significant impact on civil attitudes of participating

¹ Department of General Pedagogy and Research Methodology, Faculty of Ethnology and Education, University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland, E-MAIL: barbara.grabowski@gmail.com.

² PSL Research Univeristy, EHESS-IRIS, Paris, France; Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland, E-MAIL: kania.kar@gmail.com.

learners. While staying abroad, they experience a culture shock. Before leaving for an exchange, during a stay in a foreign country, as well as back in home country, students have a chance to take part in workshops and trainings which prepare them for a stay in a foreign country. At such meetings, participants familiarize with the strategies of adapting to a new culture and with the consequences of the culture shock which they will have to handle. The research results indicate that learners are aware that the stay in an alien place is associated with the adjustment to the new conditions, surroundings, culture, family, school (Grabowska & Kania, 2017). They are aware of difficulties and challenges they will have to face staying abroad. However, what is equally important as participation in an exchange is the return home. Do learners know what will wait for them after the return to Poland? Can this return be associated with the difficulties of the same kind as those they have experienced abroad?

The undertaken studies *Leaving and returning – participation in intercultural exchanges and experiencing culture shock by youth* were aimed at learning the reactions and behaviours of young people coming back to Poland from educational exchanges. For recognizing the reality, the nomothetic explanation was used and, “from the angle of facts described in theory” (Rubacha, 2008, p. 15), the studies were designed for a purposefully selected sample. The research with the use of questionnaire method comprised forty five respondents (68.9% were women, 31.1% – men). Over a half of the respondents are current university students (61.4%), the others (36.4%) are upper-secondary school learners, one person is a university graduate. The respondents have taken part in exchange programmes in the following countries: Argentina, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dominican Republic, France, Spain, Costa Rica, Germany, Hungary, Italy. 75.6% of the respondents have taken part in year exchanges,³ others – in trimester exchanges.⁴ The group was selected through purposeful sampling and it consisted of the participants of AFS⁵ intercultural exchange pro-

³ A year exchange lasts a whole school year (about 10 months). Going abroad usually takes place at the end of August and the comeback to Poland at the end of June.

⁴ Since 2009, ECTP (*European Citizenship Trimester Programme*) has been co-organized by EFIL (*European Federation for Intercultural Learning*) – the federation which associates European AFS organizations. It is a programme of school exchange which gives the participants the opportunity to immerse in a different culture, with additional emphasis on promoting active European citizenship. The exchange lasts from the end of August to the end of November. At the end of the exchange (early December), just before the return home, all participants meet at the seminar ECTP Camp in Brussels to share their experience, take part in intercultural education workshops, and visit EU institutions. Currently, about 240 learners from 25 European countries take part in ECTP exchange programmes.

⁵ AFS is an international organization promoting intercultural educational exchanges.

grammes organized by Father Siemaszko Foundation, which were implemented in 2010–2016. The applied questionnaire comprised closed, half-open and open questions. The research results presented in the article constitute a section of the wider research project implemented by the authors among the participants of international exchanges – both school and university students.

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK – THE THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH

The issue of reverse culture shock, with which learners are confronted after the return to homeland, has become a subject of scientific reflection quite recently. The majority of studies carried out so far have concerned the shock resulting from the contact with a new culture (Oberg, 1960; Black, Mendenhall, 1991; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). As a result of the conducted analyses, three models of culture shock have been elaborated: “U”, “J”, “W” (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Black, Mendenhall, 1991).

In the “W” model, the possibility of reverse culture shock associated with the return home has been taken into consideration. This model assumes that culture shock is not a single experience which passes by. In their work, Gullahorn and Gullahorn broadened the stages of adaptation in the new cultural environment with the return home, mentioning: return to homeland, reverse shock, adaptation to home culture (Figure 1).

There are not many theoretical and empirical analyses of reverse culture shock in Polish expert literature (Chutnik, 2007; Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Durlik, & Szydłowska, 2015). The studies have been conducted among managers, professionals, children returning with their parents from emigration, university students learning in foreign universities under the Erasmus+ programme. Adults, workers – either posted or changing the job on their own – decide themselves where they will live. They often move with their families, live together and build a new reality abroad. Erasmus+ university students often live in student dormitories with other students from their country, which enhances the bonds among people of the same nationality. Moreover, students have the option of renting a flat and they

While staying abroad, learners live in local host families and they attend secondary school, owing to which they have the possibility to immerse fully in the culture of the host country. **More on AFS:** Grabowska & Kania, 2017.

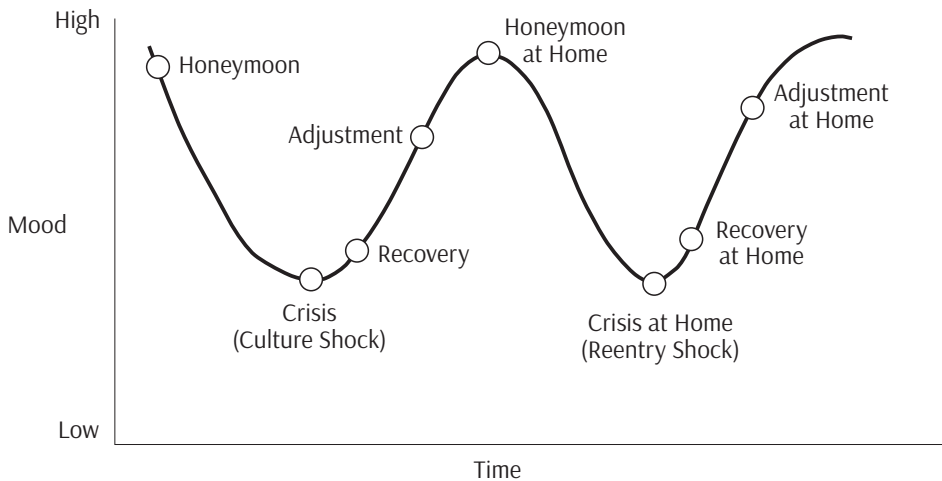


Figure 1. The course of leaving and return culture shock (“W” Model)

Source: Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963.

often decide to share it with other participants of the exchange programme (Kania, 2014).

The examined groups should be supplemented with learners participating in educational exchanges who spend in the host country a trimester, a semester or a full year. This situation is specific – learners live in host families and go to local schools, often with the children raised in these families. Owing to this, they have a chance to immerse in the new culture in a full, round-the-clock way.

Leaving, both for a short and long time, is associated with coming back. A return to home culture is often more difficult than a stay abroad (Adler, 1981; Martin, 1984). Yet, relatively few studies have been carried out so far on the course of returning home. Therefore, the issue seems even more worth exploring.

When they leave for the host country, participants of educational exchanges know that they will come back, they often know the exact comeback date. Thus, this is not a surprise or an unexpected decision of their parents. The biggest difficulty concerning the return is associated with the unexpectedness of problems which appear after coming back home, which has drawn attention of Judith N. Martin (1984) as well as of Rogers and Ward (1993). The latter conducted research among AFS year exchange participants from New Zealand. During the exchange, learners were asked about the expectations concerning their return home. Not later than 10 weeks after the comeback to New Zealand, they filled another question-

naire concerning their actual experiences. The research has shown no significant correlation between the expectations and experiences. What is more, in cases when the return was more difficult than they had expected, learners felt anxious and depressed.

It seems that coming back to Poland means returning to the well-known “own” culture, own family, friends, acquaintances, places. What may surprise them? A thesis might be put forward that EVERYTHING. Life has been going on in its own rhythm in the host country, but the “life” in the homeland has not been petrified either and is not waiting for a person’s comeback. Learners participating in the exchange have changed, developed, grown up. When they went abroad, they took values, habits, customs acquired since the earliest years of their life in Poland. A stay abroad, in a new culture, living and sharing life with the host family, often brings about changes in habits and traditions, even those concerning cuisine. What changes is learners’ sensitivity and their perception of the reality. After overcoming the difficulties of adjusting to the new culture, a period takes place of further adaptation and drawing pleasure from life in a new environment. As Ewa Kownacka (2006, p. 39) notices, living for a longer period of time in a new country is associated from the very beginning with learning quite fundamental and seemingly obvious elements of daily routine. Learners have to familiarize with the principles of functioning at school, at home, in social life – both the visible (meals time, school regulations) and the hidden and often not consciously realized by the local population (norms, values, non-verbal communication). By learning new cultural codes, they understand their own culture better and, at the same time, they become more critical towards it. During educational exchanges, learners undertake the effort of learning culture, developing their knowledge and social skills in order to make the best of their stay in the host country. When they come back to Poland, they need to face new challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The examined participants of AFS exchanges had lots of expectations from their return to Poland. They hoped that their nearest relatives would be interested in the experiences associated with the exchange (69.6%). They also believed that nothing had changed at home and at school (21.7%). As one female respondent who found the return very difficult notices: *I hoped everything would be as it had been before my leaving, but I wasn’t the same, which made this in a certain sense harder. I’m much more mature and I have quite different priorities than my peers* [K, aged 17,

an upper-secondary school learner, a year exchange in France]. The stay associated with educational exchange is really an occasion for students' learning, raising their self-awareness, personal development, and for increasing their cultural competences. Many changes take place in participants – both at individual (mental) and social level. As one male participant recollects: *I've noticed that the exchange has given me the feeling of strong bond with Poland, reassuring me at the same time that I am a citizen of the world* [M, aged 21, a university student, a year exchange in Flemish Belgium]. Learners declare that they are more mature, responsible, their self-esteem increases, they acquire decision making and problem solving skills, they become fluent in the foreign language, independent, bold. By becoming more open and sensitive to cultural differences, learners acquire the easiness in establishing contacts with others as well as a broader view on particular situations and events. The respondents were sure of this and only a few believed that they had not changed (13%).

Coming back home from an educational exchange also raised many fears. Learners were afraid of the changes which had taken place at home and at school (52.7%). Almost a half of the respondents (47.6%) were afraid that it was them who had changed. Among hopes that the family would be interested in their experiences concerning the exchange, there were fears that nobody would ask them about their feelings and experiences (21.4%). 23.8% of the learners felt other fears – mostly associated with leaving the host country, separation from the new family and friends. They were afraid they would lose touch with the people with whom they had shared life for a year. Others were afraid of the difficulties in relations with Polish acquaintances.

During the whole period of separation, the examined learners maintained contacts with their family and friends. Almost a half (44.4%) declared the strengthening of relations with families and friends. In the case of another big group (37.8%), these relations remained unchanged. Worse relations, drifting apart from each other, were observed by only a few respondents (6.7%). The young contacted the closest ones via social networks, talked with them using Skype and phone, wrote text messages, used traditional post. Participants of exchanges start blogs with growing willingness and frequency. These regular websites allow them for sharing their experiences of living abroad with a broader groups.

The intensive period of educational exchange is followed by the return to the homeland. What takes the most of learners' luggage are the emotions and experiences collected abroad. This brings about the difficulties which people coming back after a long stay face in the re-adaptation to the life in their own country. The learners' memories of their comeback to Poland are diverse. They write about

contradicting emotions which they felt. *I didn't quite believe it was really going on. I felt strange again. Torn away from life. On one hand, I wanted to return to Poland very much, but on the other – I wanted to stay in Belgium* [K, aged 20, university student, a year exchange in Flemish Belgium]; *Uncertainty and joy because of the return, contrary feelings* [K, aged 23, university student, a year exchange in Germany]; *I was very tired and I wanted to come back to the host country as much as to be already in Poland* [K, aged 21, university student, a year exchange in Argentina]; *It was very hard. On one hand, I was happy that I was among my closest ones again, but on the other – I couldn't find my place* [K, aged 23, a university student, a year exchange in Flemish Belgium]; *I recall the return badly. Like the Titanic crashing against the iceberg* [K, aged 19, university student, a year exchange in France].

What seems worth attention is that negative emotions were felt by the respondents for many weeks after their comeback to Poland. They had difficulties in re-adaptation: *On the first day I had neither the emotion of joy from the return nor sadness from leaving the host country. I realized that my exchange had ended only in the second week. I've lost all my contacts with my Polish friends but I've found a new group of friends, with which I'm in touch. After a year, the contacts with my old friends became normal again. I had started to quarrel with my family as well, because they hadn't been able to get used to the changes, but also after about a year everything was OK* [K, aged 21, university student, a year exchange in Italy]; *The comeback day was both sad and happy. I felt joy when I saw my family and friends but, at the same time, I missed my life in Italy. The first months after coming back home were very difficult. I felt the lack of understanding on the part of the nearest and dearest people, I didn't want to meet anybody, I spent time at home* [K, aged 20, university student, a year exchange in Italy]; *The first three weeks were full of frustration and irritation caused by the differences which I started to notice, comparing things to my previous life in France* [K, aged 22, university student, a trimester exchange in France].

Some learners wrote about unwillingness to go home: *I didn't want to come back. In Poland I felt lost as at the beginning of my stay in Belgium. I used to get lost in the places I had known all my life* [K, aged 20, upper-secondary school learner, a year exchange in French Belgium]; *It was a shock, I didn't want to come back* [K, aged 18, school learner a year exchange to Italy].

Only a few learners' responses were entirely positive: *It was a very positive event, my peers and teachers welcomed me heartily and asked about my impressions of the stay* [K, aged 23, university student, a trimester exchange in Germany]; *One of the best days in my life. I came back enriched with millions of experiences*

[K, aged 19, learner, a year exchange in Belgium]; *I was very happy that I could come back* [K, aged 19, learner, a trimester exchange in Italy].

After the learners' return home, many negative feelings appeared: disappointment concerning the return to school (38.3%), the return home (17%) and to friends (13.3%); stress associated with the return (34%). However, what prevailed were positive emotions: the joy of coming back home (66%), the return to friends (63.8%) and to school (19.1%); feeling of happiness associated with the return home (44.7%); feeling of relief and safety (12.8%). Others (12.8%) had contradicting feelings: *I felt giant yearning and breakdown. The surroundings have changed and I've grown up, though everything was to be restored and both the family and close friends were still near* [K, aged 19, a learner, a year exchange in France]; *I felt joy but this was not a "relief". It was a comeback to quite a different life. I like changes. Therefore, I probably was happy to return – something new was waiting for me* [K, aged 21, a university student, a year exchange in Belgium]; *Everything was the same but, at the same time, different, I looked at it from quite a different perspective* [K, aged 22, a university student, a year exchange in Germany].

Kalervo Oberg's model of culture shock (1960) assumes the appearance of negative feelings resulting from the contact with a different culture. The research results show that similar feelings are experienced by learners after returning from an educational exchange to their own country, home, to the well-known reality and daily routine. The awareness of one's own transformation might enhance the understanding of the difficulties faced after the comeback – 51.1% of the respondents experienced such problems. They mentioned: difficulties in re-adjustment (51.7%); feeling of alienation in their homeland (48.3%); disorientation (44.8%); stress (34.5%); learning difficulties (37.9%); inability to communicate with the nearest people (34.5%); problems with experiencing their own identity (27.6%); helplessness (24.1%); surprise and disappointment (20.7%); disappointment (17.2%); anger (13.8%); and even the feeling of being discriminated (3.4%). The difficulties which learners faced are recalled in this way: *I hadn't kept up to date the changes in the life of my family, friends and country. This ignorance resulted in isolation* [K, aged 23, a university student, a year exchange in Italy]; *I didn't feel 100% understood by my family and the environment. Many things frustrated me, I had an impression that, due to the exchange, I perceive the reality in a different way and I had to re-adjust to it* [K, aged 22, a university student, a trimester exchange in France]; *I couldn't get used to our climate, after the return I changed the class in which I couldn't find a place and I had learning difficulties* [K, aged 20, a university student, a year exchange in Italy].

42.6% of the learners did not observe difficulties, other feelings were signalled by 6.4% of the respondents.

After the return to Poland, learners need to handle the difficulties and challenges of their new situation – therefore, they have to find a way of functioning in their environment. Some learners have chosen a strategy which can be called optimistic-active and which is manifested in: undertaking activities aimed at re-adaptation (19.1%); the belief that everything will go right (61.7%); the application in the homeland of what have been learnt abroad (70.2%); feeling of biculturalism (59.6%). In their justification, the learners mentioned the undertaken activities aimed at adjusting anew to the life in Poland: *Surely, I didn't wait passively for the message from my old friends, but got in touch with them myself. Obviously not with all of them, because part of my old acquaintances had stopped to be important to me* [K, aged 20, a university student, a year exchange in Flemish Belgium]; *I spent much more time with my family after the return, I got engaged in the life of my class* [K, aged 20, a university student, a trimester exchange in France]; *meeting friends, parties, setting the life goals* [M, aged 20, a university student, a year exchange in Germany].

The functioning of some learners can be classified into the optimistic-passive model, which consists in passive waiting for what will occur after the comeback (8.5%) – *I let the life go on, simply* [M, a learner, a year exchange in the Dominican Republic] – and involves the feeling of difficulty in the functioning in the native country (12.8%).

None of the participants of international exchanges mentioned the behaviours after the return which would confirm the pessimistic-passive or the pessimistic-active approach.

Learners' experiences, earlier acquired during the educational exchange, have enhanced finding their place in the family and homeland after the exchange (Grabowska & Kania, 2017). The learners declared the attitudes which manifested the integration strategy (63.6%). They have kept the values and customs of their own culture, simultaneously accepting the culture of the host country. After their comeback, it was easier to function actively, using their bicultural experience. The young have fears, they notice difficulties, but they can face them optimistically and actively. They can make use of the acquired experience. As one female participant notices: *Before we see the world from a different angle, we don't appreciate what we have. I have appreciated my country. Poland has beautiful traditions, rich history and culture. I'm proud of this* [K, aged 21, a university student, a year exchange in Belgium].

CONCLUSION

Undertaking education in a foreign country, within a trimester, semester or year-long educational exchange, is associated with exposing young people to the experience of culture shock and reverse culture shock. As the research results show, the return to the homeland brings about equally many challenges and difficulties as going abroad. The occurrence of reverse culture shock may seem surprising, even incomprehensible, as learners come back “home”, to their country and the culture in which they have been brought up since the earliest days of their life. Yet, the emotions and experiences of secondary school learners who take part in international exchanges and come back to the native country are complex and deserve thoughtful analysis.

During an intercultural exchange, experiencing a new culture takes place in the social sphere (e.g., school education, relations in the host family, relations with new peers and other people, the place in the local community) and the mental/individual sphere (e.g., changing the self-image; increased self-awareness; discovering new potentialities, aspirations, needs, motivations; changed sociocultural identity). After the return home, learners experience similar problems to those which they had in the host country – however, now it takes place in the homeland. The theories of reverse culture shock indicate that adaptation to the native culture might be even more difficult than to the foreign one (Storti, 1995). Minimizing the difficulties associated with coming back to the homeland is possible not only in regard to appropriate preparation of learners for going away and for participation in an intercultural exchange. What is of great significance for the course of re-adaptation after returning home are the workshops organized for the participants in AFS exchanges and the support they can get after finishing their learning abroad (Gaw, 2000). The research results (Grabowska & Kania, 2017) show that earlier preparation of learners for participation in educational exchanges through taking part in intercultural workshops helps in better understanding of oneself and of others while experiencing the new culture and during the process of coming back home. Learners participated in the workshops both before going abroad and after coming back to Poland. During the workshops, which are a specific kind of intercultural training, the participants prepared for the contact with another culture and functioning in it through familiarization with the issues of cultural differences, with acculturation strategies or stress management strategies. After coming back to Poland, meeting other people who have similar experiences enables learners to realize and better understand the difficulties and challenges associated with re-adaptation to the life in the homeland. The presented research results show that

learners, during the exchange, were able to build their own strategy of functioning in the host family and country, which resulted in better handling the difficulties of the reverse culture shock. This was manifested in the optimistic-active strategy which the majority of learners applied after the return home.

Owing to the competences and skills acquired during the stay abroad as well as the experience of reverse culture shock, learners become conscious and active participants of social life in the individual, family, class, school and non-school dimension. Most of the examined participants of international educational exchanges (71.7%) engage actively in the work of the non-government organization – AFS Poland Intercultural Programs. While justifying their voluntary service, the respondents indicated both their individual benefits (their own development) as well as social ones (support for others): *I think voluntary service is the continuation of my exchange. Owing to my activity in AFS I can develop further, get acquainted with people from the whole world. In this way, my exchange hasn't finished yet but lasts in a different form. What's more, nobody can understand me so well as AFS volunteers, who have experienced similar things* [K, aged 20, a university student, a year exchange in Flemish Belgium]; *I appreciate the chance I had got. I want to multiply the benefits from the exchange, not limiting them only to my own. I like the idea of language and cultural exchanges very much, I think it's a wonderful element of the development path. Individuals' reflections and broadened awareness, acquired thanks to the exchanges, are favourable for building the society of broadened horizons. It could be said that I promote constant raising the moral standards of life* [K, aged 20, a university student, a year exchange in the Dominican Republic]; *The need for giving something instead of the possibility to participate in the programme, new contacts, personal development* [K, aged 23, a university student, a year exchange in Germany]; *I missed the contact with people of other cultures, the possibility to talk in another language than Polish. Apart from this, I wanted to "return the favour" and share my experience with people who have similar problems to those I had some time ago* [M, aged 21, a university student, a year exchange in the Dominican Republic].

After coming back to their native country, participants of intercultural exchanges have a chance to use their cultural intelligence fully. It is both the ability to function effectively in culturally diversified surroundings and the skill of distinguishing culture-determined behaviours from those depending on an individual's personality type. Cultural intelligence consists of the metacognitive component (the awareness of own cultural identity and of cultural unlikeness of the local people in interactions with them), the cognitive (the individual's knowledge of the norms, customs, practices and conventions present in different cultural envi-

ronments), the motivational (the individual's intrinsic motivation to undertake the effort aimed at efficient functioning in the culturally different surroundings) and the behavioural one (the ability to react verbally and non-verbally in an appropriate way in contacts with representatives of other cultures) (Van Dyne, Ang, Koh, 2009). Owing to the competences and skills acquired during their stay abroad, participants of international exchanges become young ambassadors of intercultural dialogue.

The discussion undertaken in this article is compliant with the discourse on multicultural societies (Sadowski, 2011). As Robert G. Hanvey (1976) notices, this discourse requires shaping "intercultural awareness" through the sensitization to the Other and the popularization among the young persons of the habit and skill of noticing and accepting the values typical of other cultures and societies. With no doubt, intercultural exchanges are a perfect tool for better understanding between cultures.

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